Delfi symposium: Psychoanalysts go back to their roots

JACQUELINE SWARTZ

In mid-August 250 psychiatrists met at a haunting, mountainous site, 500 metres from Apollo's shrine.

From early antiquity the Greeks made pilgrimages to Delfi, the most sacred place in Greece, to hear the wisdom and prophecy of the oracle. In the eerily majestic hills, Apollo's temple was built. It was there, according to Sophocles' play, that Oedipus learned he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother.

Twenty-four centuries later, Freud turned to the play, "Oedipus Rex", as the central statement of the Oedipus complex, which became a cornerstone of psychoanalysis. In mid-August, 250 psychiatrists from North America and Europe met at a haunting, mountainous site, 500 m from Apollo's shrine. It was the first psychoanalytic symposium at Delfi. The theme was personal myth and its application to the three major streams of psychoanalytic thought: classical American psychoanalysis known as ego psychology; object relations, which stresses the importance of feelings internalized from early relationships; and self-psychology, with its emphasis on the analyst's empathy. But the spirit of the meeting was a return to psychoanalysis' roots in the Greek myths.

By all accounts, the symposium was more than just another psychoanalytic meeting; it was an event that brought together some of the profession's most eminent theorists in an atmosphere that resonated with the human folly, grandeur and truth expressed by the ancient myths. The highlight of the meeting was a performance in modern Greek of Sophocles' tragedy, "Oedipus Rex".

"There was a feeling of splendid isolation", noted Dr. Jacob Arlow, dean of American ego psychology. "In more ways than one, we could leave our baggage at home." Participants, mostly psychiatrists and psychologists, stayed at nearby hotels and convened at the pine and cement European Cultural Centre. Except for the sacred site of Delfi itself, there were no distractions. As an omen, perhaps, it rained in Delfi for the first time in August for 50 years, and the light, intermittent mist cast the sky in shifting grey and pink hues. It was the perfect setting in which to explore the meaning of the inscription on Apollo's temple, "Know Thyself".

The idea for the symposium came from Georgie Babatzanis, a psychotherapist at Toronto's Hospital For Sick Children, who recalled that when she was a child in Thebes, the story of Oedipus was frequently told. She discussed the idea with Ian Graham, MD, director of the Canadian Institute of Psychoanalysis, and chairman of the symposium who contacted Dr. Peter Hartocollis, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry in Patras, Greece, and the project got underway. "Greek civilization has given so much to psychiatry", Graham noted. "It taught us about man as a being with an unconscious; it gave us concepts like hubris, nemesis, ambivalence, eros and thanatos. By going back to our roots, and by giving encouragement to the emerging psychoanalytic movement in Greece, we hoped to make a gesture of payment to this debt."

Fully half the papers dealt with myths — their truth as expressed in the Greek myths, as well as their meaning in the therapeutic process. The prehistory of psychoanalysis in ancient Greece was discussed by Montreal analyst Dr. George Zavitzianos, who was one of the members of the first Greek psychoanalytic group, formed after World War II. The concept of the unconscious, said Zavitzianos, existed in ancient Greece. "Aristotle recognized the common origin of dreams, of the illusions and of the hallucinations of the psychotic. He denies that dreams are god-sent. Yet, though not divine, they may be considered demonic". Plato, in his "Republic", stated that in dreams, the "unlawful" desires search for gratification. And in his ribald satire, "The Clouds", the playwright Aristophanes has Socrates ask his disciple to lie on the couch and free associate.

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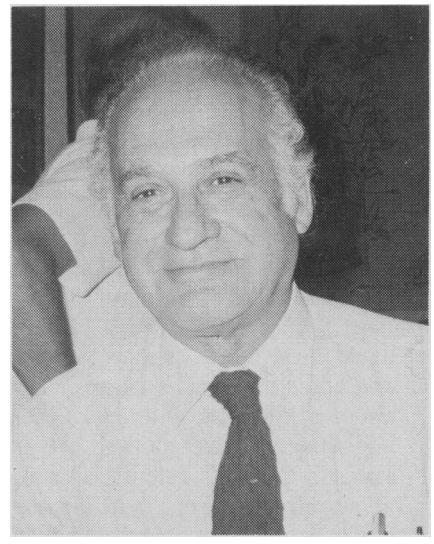
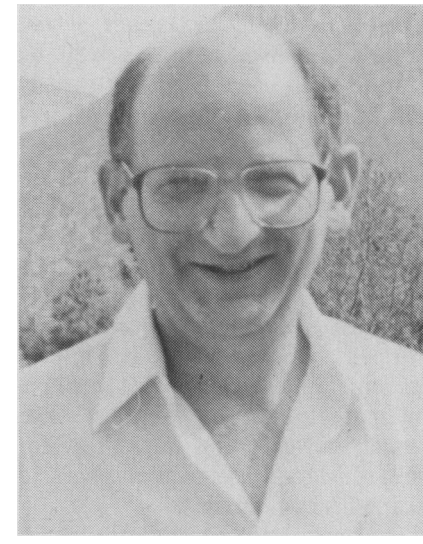
Noting that Freud wrote his boyhood diary in ancient Greek, Zavatzianos remarked that "mythology helped Freud understand some unconscious processes and find confirmation of many of his discoveries". Yet Freud and his followers, in looking at the clinical situation, ascribed another meaning to myth, one in which a patient falsifies his recollections.

In the mid-1950s, the notion of the personal myth became well-known as a result of the writings of Dr. Ernst Kris. According to Dr. Ernest Wolf, chief spokesman for the American school of self-psychology, Kris referred to non-psychotic patients "who construct from their autobiographical memories a firmly knit and richly detailed self-image that becomes their treasured possession and to which they cling with peculiar devotion. On the road to self-knowledge this screen, the personal myth, becomes a long detour because it is designed to hide rather than to reveal." Kris, said Wolf, used the word "duplicity" to describe such patients. Yet truth, Wolfe countered, is only what is experienced as true. "It is not the analyst's job to modify our patient's view of reality to bring it into conformity with our view. It is our job to use whatever information we can gather about his self state, to help him recognize that state . . . and to help him see what he can do to alter and to strengthen it." Freud's total commitment to the truth as he saw



Wolf: treat a patient's personal myths with respect and dignity



Kernberg: challenging a patient doesn't have to mean moralizing

it prevented him from harvesting his rich insights into the creative and curative process, said Wolfe. "For no matter how much of the actuality of the real world we believe, there still remains a psychic reality . . . in which we live and which we reject at the peril of our sanity." The personal myth of patients should be treated with respect and gentleness, Wolfe concluded.

Responding to Dr. Wolfe's remarks, New York psychoanalyst Dr. Otto Kernberg (professor of psychiatry, Cornell University, training and supervising analyst, Columbia University Center Psychoanalytic Training and the major theorist of the American object relations "stream"), noted that challenging a patient doesn't have to mean moralizing. In a presentation on mythological encounters in clinical situations, Kernberg spoke about using metaphor as a fragment or condensation of a general myth. In a clinical situation this can help to link concrete material with a more general psychoanalytic myth such as the Oedipus complex. He described a patient who was involved with a woman who worked in the same building in which Kernberg had his office. When the patient revealed his fear of the analyst's resentment, Kernberg suggested that "he was expressing the implicit fantasy that I was the jealous owner of all the women in that building". The fantasy may be considered part of the

general myth of the 'keeper of the horde', said Kernberg, as well as relating to the oedipal father threatening the son, who is sexually interested in the mother, with castration.

The metaphor, Kernberg went on to say, reflected a hypothesis that required confirmation. For advancing preliminary interpretations based on metaphors is a valuable but dangerous psychoanalytic instrument. Because they are imprecise, metaphors can help mobilize the patient and the therapist. The danger, however, lies in the psychoanalyst's facile use of metaphors to escape his own anxiety.

The most palpable description of how and why a personal myth is created and used was presented by Dr. Eva Lester, professor of psychiatry, McGill University, and director of child and adolescent services at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal. Lester spoke about the narcissistic pathology and the defensive use of the personal myth in the life and work of the Cretan writer, Nikos Kazantzakis. Known for his life-affirming character of Zorba, Kazantzakis wrote prodigiously about his passion for freedom and his desire for sainthood. "To be a hero and a saint, this is the highest model for man", he wrote in "Report to Greco". Kazantzakis' aim was to create a new religion, with man, not God as the saviour. Like his image of God, his father was cruel, authoritarian and exploitative. He described his mother as a gentle

Lester: the how and why of personal myths

Freud's own blindspots

At the First Delfi International Psychoanalytic Symposium, which brought psychoanalysts back to their roots in the Greek myths, discussion focused on the Oedipus complex and on the play, "Oedipus Rex", from which Freud drew inspiration. As many speakers noted, the play is not only about a king who kills his father and marries his mother. It is about a person's relentless truth about himself. This, participants noted, is reflected in Freud's own quest. Yet the founder of psychoanalysis had his own blindspots, and nowhere is this more apparent than in his views of women.

A central aspect of the Oedipus complex involves castration anxiety and penis envy. In a paper on the female Oedipal complex, New York psychoanalyst Dr. Doris Bernstein noted that "Freud's desire for a single developmental theory 'blinded' him to obvious differences between boys and girls and forced him to cast the female in the mold of the male. This is a very poor fit — Oedipus was a boy."

Instead of castration anxiety, Bernstein posited the term "access" to describe girls' anxieties about their genitalia. The girl does not have access to her genitalia. She cannot touch and manipulate them in a desexualized way that is not forbidden or tied to forbidden fantasies. "There is no conflict-free mastery over this part of her body", explained Bernstein, adding that a girl cannot control access to her sexual opening — by herself or others. "Girls have penetration anxiety." Instead of concrete envy of the penis, Bernstein added, girls may envy the boundary that the penis suggests. "The central conflict for girls seems to be individuation, not castration", she said, explaining that the union with the mother implies a blurring of boundaries of the child's emerging psyche with that of the mother. "This is manifest in the poor self-image so characteristic of our female patients."

The girl's problem with mastery over what is unseen and beyond touch, a mastery that must precede sexual pleasure, can result in the renunciation of sexuality altogether. Bernstein cited the model of the devoted, sexless daughter as an adult version of the "good little girl". Such a woman often idealizes her father and is represented in Cordelia, in Shakespeare's "King Lear" — and by Freud's daughter Anna. The figure of Elektra also sounds this theme. Yet Freud only made three parenthetical references to the Elektra complex, and eventually dismissed it, saying it was not analogous to the Oedipus complex.

Bernstein noted that many of the themes that are prominent in female psychology — frustrated longing, envy, helplessness, masochism, revenge — are found in the Greek plays about Elektra.

The second daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, Elektra is mired in hatred for her mother for taking a lover, Aegisthes, and later, for murdering Agamemnon. Instead of taking her own revenge, she waits for her brother, Orestes, to rescue her. She stands in contrast to Oedipus, who kills his father and takes his place. Moreover, she idealizes her father, Agamemnon, even though he has been absent for years and has sacrificed her sister, Iphigenia, to appease the gods. Elektra's lofty notions of her father are based on unfulfilled longings, remarked Bernstein. But he is not there to help her separate from her mother or affirm her own desirability. "She cannot identify with her mother, she cannot identify with her father . . . all her rage and aggression, without assistance in externalizing them, turn inward into the very model of a female masochist."

In a paper on the Oedipus myth as Freud's personal myth, Monique Schneider, PhD, psychoanalyst and philosophy profes-

Schneider: Freud made revealing omissions

sor at the Ecole normale supérieure in Paris, pointed out that Freud made several revealing omissions in describing the play, "Oedipus Rex". First, Freud made no mention of the suicide of Jocasta, Oedipus' mother and wife. This suicide is anticipated by the downfall of the sphinx, which occurs when Oedipus solves her riddle. Although the sphinx was widely regarded as female, Freud describes her as a "monster symbolizing the father".

Freud, Schneider remarked, rather than presenting psychoanalysis as indebted to the Greek heritage and its literary texts, describes the Oedipus complex as discovered by psychoanalysis. It is this erasing of the literary origin of the complex, said Schneider, "that enables Freud to claim for the psychoanalytic undertaking an essentially scientific descent." By looking at only part of the oracle's decree — at the patricide and incest — Freud, moreover, can ignore the other murderous elements: the deaths of Jocasta and the sphinx, and the initial attempt by Oedipus' parents to kill him. Freud can thus abandon any labyrinthine exploration of the play. As Schneider says, "The oracle has spoken in advance, and it is necessary that it be right." This partial interpretation of the oracle and the play, said Schneider, allowed Freud to designate the victim, Oedipus, as guilty, even though in the play he is presented as a seeker of justice and truth.

The Oedipus complex was a watershed in psychoanalysis. Yet, said Schneider, it served to enshroud as well as to reveal. "When Freud, in his theoretical approach, characterizes the female as the absence of a penis, without mentioning the vaginal opening, which is regularly bloody, hasn't he . . . sutured the female genital?" Similarly, Oedipus in the play monopolizes the flow of blood by blinding himself: he bleeds, as it were, instead of Jocasta, who dies by hanging. Perhaps this "denial of the feminine, of maternal blood, and its appropriation by the male, had a kind of instigating virtue", added Schneider. However, she concluded, psychoanalysis can only recognize this founding virtue when it is no longer fearful of being in collusion with a figure of blindness.

"Oedipus Rex": the psychoanalytic connection

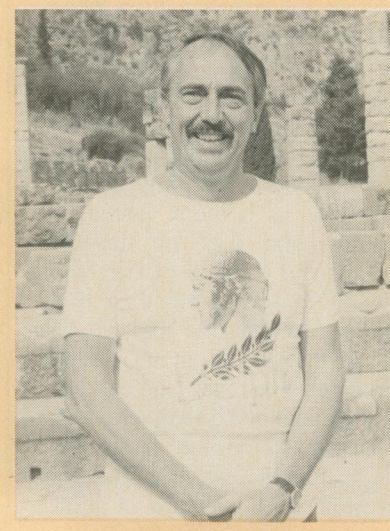
It was an unique encounter. On a misty night at the outdoor theatre in Delfi, several hundred psychoanalysts watched the dramatization of psychoanalysis' basic myth in Sophocles' tragedy, "Oedipus Rex". Filling the empty staged marked by labyrinthine floor patterns, the splendid figure of Oedipus the king emerges, his voice echoing from the surrounding trees. Responding to the chorus's moans of the plagues that have befallen the city, he vows to find the reason. When he learns of the oracle's pronouncement that the city is dying because of the murder of King Laius, Oedipus is driven to find the killer, unaware that it is himself, and that Laius was his father. From then on the play moves with mathematical horror: Oedipus gets clues, some true, some misleading, until finally the blind shaman, Tireseus, gives him proof of his culpability. Oedipus' wife-mother, Jocasta, pleads with him to stop his relentless search. Then, when she must face the truth, she rushes offstage to hang herself. With the pins of her dress, Oedipus blinds himself, achieving an inner vision and wisdom.

For the participants at the First Delfi International Psychoanalytic Symposium, the play was the highlight of the 5-day meeting, giving breath and creativity to their theories. Said Toronto psychiatrist Dr. John Babatzanis, one of the organizers of the symposium: "This dramatized, communal experience of the Oedipus myth helped us to reconnect psychoanalysis with Delfi. It was a gift." Other participants found the play illuminating because of its deep strata of multiple meanings — it is a family tragedy that resonates in the larger community, a play about guilt and redemption, blindness and knowing. Part of the inspiration came from the play's director, Minos Volonakis, who impressed the symposium participants with his own psychological orientation and insights. The Oxford-trained director, who recently toured the production in North America, was on hand to discuss his conception of Sophocles' tragedy.

More than a play about the fulfillment of the oracle or about the barbaric splendor of ancient royalty, "Oedipus," said Volonakis, is a play about self-discovery — "the danger, glory and terror of finding out who you are". The play is about a very modern man, he added, "a fifth century Athenian, not a man controlled by primitive urges". Oedipus' decision to face his past is freely chosen. He lives in a world that seems free, yet there are underlying patterns he must discover.

This Volonakis expressed through the visual metaphor of the labyrinth. It is an ancient and universal pattern, he noted, in which there is only one, inevitable way to proceed. "The labyrinth is a place where, at the centre, you meet something momentous, be it monster or god. As Oedipus gets closer and closer to his own real identity, he reaches it, and then finds his own way out." No one can help him, and until the end of the play, no one touches him.

The character in the play who most blatantly ignores the labyrinth is Jocasta, who must learn of her own identity as Oedipus' mother who conspired to kill him when he was an infant. On the verge of self-knowledge, she pleads with Oedipus to enjoy this "world of chance" without being obsessed by guilt. "Boys dream they sleep with their mothers", she says — it is only natural. For a time, Oedipus concurs. Defiantly, he denies any legacy and pronounces himself "The Son of Fortune".

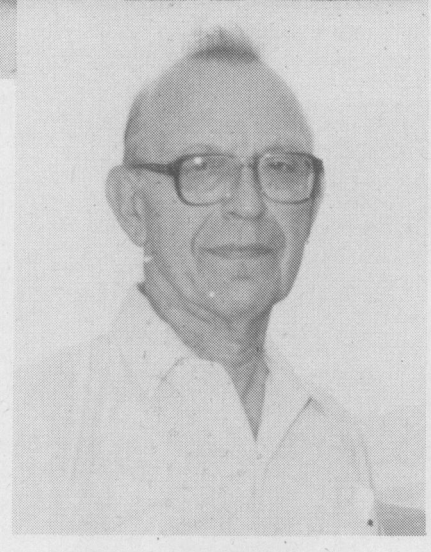


Graham: putting eyes in us all

At one point in the play, the actors in the chorus take off their masks and speak as the voice of the playright. If crime thrives unrepentant, they ask, why should they go on with the sacred performance? This action, which occurs in other Greek tragedies, Volonakis describes as "breaking the law".

As conference chairman and Toronto psychoanalyst Dr. Ian Graham noted in a discussion with the director, the same procedure occurs in psychoanalysis. "When the analyst believes he understands an as yet unarticulated process going on in the patient . . . he begins to break the law of suppression and repression and of not talking about the unbearable."

Volonakis was asked why he chose the play. "For me", he replied, "Oedipus Rex is a play of return". Oedipus returns to Thebes. And Volonakis, after 8 years of self-exile in London during the military regime in Greece, returned to his country. Having avoided the play for many years because he saw it as a confirmation of patriarchal laws and values, Volonakis began to see the play in a new light. "Return dramatizes time", he noted. "I realized that in coming home, you always have to choose the parts of the past you kill and the parts you marry." In thanking Volonakis, Graham concluded that "in contrast to Oedipus taking his eyes out, you put eyes into all of us".



Wallerstein: interpreting the message from the oracle at Delfi

madonna. Yet, noted Lester, herself from Crete, "we can see her as a depressed, despairing woman sunk in helpless, hostile resignation". For Kazatzakis, who married twice, but spent long periods of time alone or in the company of other male artists, women are divided into madonnas or temptresses. The latter have the power to distract man from his highest calling of creativity and freedom.

In his autobiographical novel, "Freedom Or Death", the father is the central character, "the apotheosis of the male's ultimate triumph over the sexual drive and his final sacrifice to the ideal of freedom". Kazantsakis' relationship with his own father, said Lester, was deeply ambivalent. The bookish child feared, hated and admired him, and longed for his approval. At the end of the novel, the schoolteacher son is reconciled with the father only in the doomed ecstasy of the Cretan's battle against the Turks.

For Lester, Kazantsakis' personal myth "represents an amalgam of the grandiose self of the narcissistic personality, the idiosyncratic talents and ego precocities of the writer, and the particular cultural and social reality of his life, a reality imbued with legends and tales".

In her presentation, she combined the three "streams" of psychoanalytic thought. But Dr. André Green, the influential French psychoanalyst, went almost as far as to dismiss them.

"The conflict between the three streams", said Green, "is parochial, even though the parish is as big as America. In Europe, he explained, there are other streams, notably the work of Melanie Klein in England and Jacques Lacan in France (in Canada, British theorists are known, the French much less so).

According to Green, psychoanalytic interpretations based on a patient's drives and defenses do not work. This gave rise to self psychology's emphasis on empathy. "But to have empathy alone", said Green, "is to give up psychoanalysis". Green also criticized the primacy of the concept of the ego. "In France, we don't trust ego psychology. It's a way of obscuring the real nature of the unconscious, a way that leads to oversimplification."

Personal myth, explained Green, can be seen in a structuralist perspective marked by mythification, heroization and narrative. Moreover, as other participants came to believe, personal myth can be a creative force. "Myth is a means of getting in touch with what cannot be told otherwise. In contrast to fantasy, which is a way of mental functioning that addresses only the self, myth addresses others. Personal myth is the only accessible way to order fantasy", said Green, who maintained that psychotics do not have personal myths in the sense of a consistant self-image.

The creation of the personal myth, Green explained, occurs in states of separation from the mother, glimpses of which occur even in early childhood. After the child believes detachment has occurred, he ceases to idealize her and begins to idealize himself. "The subject is in a sense denying his roots to the most important object in his life." This, noted Green, is the cause of heroization, which is not always successful.

Green described narrative as the patient's basic story, in which what matters is plot — the details can change. Quoting the maverick French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, he said that "It is the order of words that creates the order of things". Psychoanalysts must rely on the "talking cure", although they are often dissatisfied with it. And if myth is to be creative and curative, said Green, the analyst must transform the patient's language into poetry — not beautiful but evocative. Even though, at the end of analysis, both partners find themselves mythless, Green concluded, "fortunately, the need for myth is too strong for it to disappear. It is an essential ingredient of love — of culture, of humanity, of life".

In summing up the symposium, Robert Wallerstein, MD, chairman of the department of psychiatry at the University of California Medical School, and a training analyst at the San Francisco Institute of Psychoanalysis, said that to become more of a science, psychoanalysis must give up its oracular pretence. Moreover, psychoanalysts can benefit from a clearsighted exploration of myth.

"At this historic event in psychoanalysis", he concluded, "we have been inspired to study myth within our natures, our cultures, within the family and in the psychoanalytic situation itself." Perhaps the message from the oracle at Delfi was that it is time for the profession to give up its claims to being a priesthood. ■